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Professional Resource:

*Literature and the Web: Reading and
Responding with New Technologies (2008)*

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Literature and the Web: Reading and Responding with New Technologies. Robert Rozema and Allen Webb. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008. 168 pp. \$25.00. ISBN 978-0-325-02147-8 / 0-325-02147-3

At first glance, *Literature and the Web: Reading and Responding with New Technologies* by Robert Rozema and Allen Webb is a practical book geared towards English teachers looking to add to their repertoire of tools and methods for engaging young readers. Framed in the light of what the authors identify as four key goals of literature instruction—guiding students into the story world, developing close reading ability, scaffolding students' understanding of a text's broader social, cultural, and historical contexts, and providing students with authentic opportunities to respond to a text—*Literature and the Web* provides readers with classroom-proven strategies and ideas that help teachers to harness the power of the Web for maximum student engagement. The provision of such strategies is certainly an English teacher's dream, and yet *Literature and the Web* is still so much more.

From a media literacy education perspective, *Literature and the Web* is a resource that can help teachers from a range of disciplines—including English, social studies, health, and science—harness the power of the Web to facilitate the development of new media literacy skills today's students need for full engagement in the participatory culture of the 21st century. New media literacy skills like those identified previously in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* include play, performance, simulation, appropriation, collective intelligence, judgment, networking, and negotiation, among others (Jenkins et al. 2006, 4). Such

skills can be accounted for in the classroom through the use of many of the tools and applications identified by Rozema and Webb.

In the first chapter, Webb shares his experience using electronic archives to provide students with a more diverse range of texts. Drawing from his own classroom teaching experiences, Webb notes the benefits of engaging students in reading various translations of Homer's *Odyssey* available online, recognizing that “when they looked closely at the word choice and phrasing they could also see how translations affected the reader's understanding of characters and events” (9). Webb traces the benefits of such literary explorations to his students' readings of contemporary news stories as presented from various sources, including Al-Jazeera, BBC News, and CNN. As Webb acknowledges, the vast media texts available online allowed his students to explore “why Al-Jazeera might want to quote the Association of Muslim Scholars and why CNN and BBC News reports would never describe Americans as ‘invaders’” (14). Examples like these help readers to better understand the value in helping students negotiate meaning across diverse communities and amidst multiple perspectives.

Teachers of all disciplines will find value in the third chapter, where Rozema explores feed readers, also known as RSS aggregators, as tools that provide opportunities for students to practice transmedia navigation and further develop judgment skills. The basic function of RSS aggregators—efficiently pulling in an array of media texts—can help students begin to explore content across a range of mediums from print articles to podcasts. Of course, with an abundance of information and data comes the need for sound judgment and the ability to distinguish between the apt and

the extraneous. Furthermore, students in any discipline can compare and contrast the framing of a content-specific issue across various media sources, enhancing their judgment skills in the process.

As he describes podcasting, from its basic definition and the software required for listening to the vast outlets available, Rozema illustrates the ways publishing podcasts can help ease students into the role of media producer. He notes that "as in the case of all online publishing, podcasting...gives students a real voice" (67). Through examples of student book talks published online as podcasts, Rozema helps his readers to see the many factors weighing on the choices student media producers make, including mood, form, perspective, pacing, and audience. Though framed in the context of an English classroom, such factors must be accounted for in all contexts of media production, whether the podcasts are experimental observations recorded in a science classroom or public service announcements created in health class.

While social networks are referenced only briefly in the third chapter, Rozema's attention to established sites like MySpace and Facebook, as well as private social networks that can be built through Ning, suggests possibilities for enhancing students' play, performance, and simulation skills. With literature, Rozema suggests engaging students in the creation of profiles for characters of a novel or play. He indicates that "this involves writing a personal description of the character, finding a fitting image to represent him, choosing his friends, listing his favorite hobbies and music, leaving notes on other characters' pages, and blogging from his perspective" (74). Simulations of online experiences that many students already take part in may also serve as prompts for engaging students in thinking about their own online identities and facilitating conversations about media and self-representation.

Performance, simulation, and play are new media literacy skills that are also at the center of the fourth chapter, where Rozema explores the possibilities for engaging students in virtual reality environments. He leads those unfamiliar with the technology by the hand, beginning by defining the platforms and describing the interfaces, and moving carefully to look at students in action within a virtual environment. Rozema highlights the ways high school students simulated the experience of characters in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, identifying with and, ultimately, role playing as characters existing in the World State depicted in the dystopian novel. Performance and play

opportunities such as these are significant experiences for, as Rozema suggests, "students imagined where their characters were and what they were doing, with their virtual characters lending them new perspectives on the events of the novel" (89). Helping students to examine issues from multiple perspectives is surely a desirable outcome of media literacy education, and Rozema demonstrates the potential for using text-based virtual reality systems to achieve that outcome.

Literature and the Web even proves to be a beneficial resource for teachers constrained by technology limitations. Rozema and Webb provide strategies for making use of the book's suggested online applications in classrooms where the technology is limited or completely non-existent. Each chapter concludes with suggestions like this one at the end of the third chapter, which introduces students to feed readers or RSS aggregators in a classroom with minimal technology resources: "In the absence of any computer, you could take in a few local newspapers and ask students to find articles that deal with the same issues. As they examined sports sections, feature articles, and news stories, the class would collectively aggregate information and learn an important lesson about the pervasiveness of gender inequality" (76). Such suggestions illustrate not only Rozema and Webb's acknowledgment of the limited resources and support available to many classroom teachers, but also the fact that technology is not a necessity when it comes to helping students establish a collective intelligence, network amongst their peers, and negotiate meaning. In this way, *Literature and the Web* helps teachers to focus less on the technology and more on the literacy skills today's students need most to flourish in the 21st century.

As a book for English teachers, Robert Rozema and Allen Webb's *Literature and the Web: Reading and Responding with New Technologies* is a literature-focused, content-centered approach to engaging young readers. As a resource for teachers of any discipline interested in incorporating new media literacy skills into the curriculum, *Literature and the Web* is required reading for all.

Notes

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Chicago, IL: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. http://digitallearning.macfound.org/atf/cf/%7B7E45C7E0-A3E0-4B89-AC9C-E807E1B0AE4E%7D/JENKINS_WHITE_PAPER.PDF